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How to End a War: Some Historical Lessons for Ukraine

François Heisbourg

History is replete with wars between states that turned out to be either considerably shorter or substantially longer than any of the belligerents had expected. In just the last century, there was the Arab–Israeli Six-Day War in 1967, on the one hand, and the Sino-Japanese War that started as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 and lasted eight years, on the other. The latter conflict arguably began even earlier, in 1931, with rogue Japanese forces’ act of sabotage, which led to Japan’s limited takeover of Manchuria.¹

The Russian war against Ukraine is not untypical of historical precedent, ancient or recent, and indeed bears some resemblance to the multiple-step Sino-Japanese War – right down to the Kwantung Army’s insubordination, which is broadly analogous to the Wagner Group’s recent mutiny. The war began with a minimal-force invasion of Crimea, a Ukrainian region that Russia annexed in March 2014, followed by lethal proxy operations in parts of the Donbas, another Ukrainian region. It became a geographically confined war, with more than 14,000 fatalities, including hundreds of Russian soldiers.² On 24 February 2022, Russia undertook a full-scale attempt to seize the capital of Ukraine and to invade and occupy the country as a whole. Similar in conception to the largely bloodless Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the lethal and initially effective takeover of Kabul on 27 December 1979, this so-called ‘special military operation’

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failed in its political objective of replacing the incumbent Ukrainian government, which the Kremlin expected to fall within four days.³ It did succeed in rapidly infiltrating a swathe of northern Ukraine up to Kharkiv and a broad expanse of southern Ukraine. At the peak of the invasion in March–April 2022, the Russians occupied close to 140,000 square kilometres, more than one-fifth of the territory of Ukraine, which is the largest wholly European country. At the time of writing, Moscow's troops held some 109,395 square kilometres, including the territory linking Crimea and the Donbas and most of Luhansk *oblast*, as well as the regions occupied before 24 February 2022, namely Crimea and much of Donetsk.

The ongoing war is already long and lethal. By June 2023, tens of thousands of soldiers had been killed in battle on both sides. By comparison, in nine years of war, around 26,000 Soviet personnel died in Afghanistan.⁴ Large-scale atrocities have occurred, material damage has been estimated in the hundreds of billions of dollars, and Ukraine's GDP fell by some 29% in 2022.⁵ As of June 2023, neither side appeared amenable to a negotiated political settlement.

The nature of the war

The Russian invasion is part of Moscow's openly expressed attempt to change the post-Cold War security order in Europe, which Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly denounced since his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference. In December 2021, the Kremlin preceded the invasion by presenting two draft documents, cast as 'security treaties', to the United States and NATO, pointedly excluding NATO's European member states. Under the treaties, NATO would be prevented from fulfilling its defence obligations to countries that had joined the Alliance after the dissolution of the Soviet Union – that is, the ex-Warsaw Pact countries, the Baltic states, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. New members, and explicitly Ukraine, would be precluded from joining the Alliance. This attempt to close NATO's door was what initially prompted Finland to rethink its decision not to join NATO. Much as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War, Russia is now seeking to break the Euro-Atlantic security and defence system.⁶

Never, however, has the Soviet Union or Russia resisted the enlargement of NATO through war. The Kremlin had strongly voiced its objections to the admission of Greece and especially Turkiye in 1952, and even more strongly opposed that of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1955. But once they had taken place, Moscow moved on. In the 1980s, with the crisis over the deployment of middle-range American missiles in Europe prompted by the Soviet deployment of the intermediate-range SS-20 missile in full spate, the accession of Spain nonetheless drew little attention. Nor did Russia provoke a major crisis when the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined in 1999: indeed, that process occurred shortly after the Russia–NATO Founding Act had come into effect in 1997. In 2004, four years into his first presidential term, Putin acquiesced to a ‘Big Bang’ enlargement, which included the three Baltic republics annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The accession of Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020 drew little response, though a poorly conducted coup attempt was foiled in Montenegro. Even Finland’s and Sweden’s accession process in 2022 failed to produce a crisis, and Finnish officials and consultants, for their part, closely studied the Soviet/Russian pattern of acceptance in informing Finland’s decision to join NATO.⁷ In the event, Russia downplayed the development once it was clear it couldn’t be stopped by words alone.

Contingencies in which Moscow attempted to change the security order – the Berlin blockade in 1948–49, the Korean War, the Berlin crises during Nikita Khrushchev’s tenure, the Cuban Missile Crisis and today the war against Ukraine – were freighted with a high risk of conventional or nuclear war. Yet neither the Soviet Union nor Russia has attempted to invade any member of NATO. Russia did, of course, object to the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO in 2008, but we cannot know whether their accession would have led to aggressive action on Russia’s part. What we do know is that NATO left the accession process for those countries in abeyance, and Russia subsequently attacked them.

The war against Ukraine is fundamentally a neo-imperial project of which, according to Putin, the ‘unity of the Russians and the Ukrainians’ is a precondition.⁸ He appears to share Zbigniew Brzezinski’s view that

‘without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine sub-orned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire’.⁹ This disposition puts Russia in a category of one in Europe when it comes to territorial imperialism. It qualifies as not merely a debating point but a reality, and it is key to understanding how difficult it is, and will continue to be, for Russia even after Putin to come to terms with ‘losing’ Ukraine.

The end of European imperialism was often a painful exercise for all concerned. Empires rarely fade away. The colonial empires of Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal were not liquidated without violent disorder and war. When France, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and by then a nuclear power, decided under Charles de Gaulle to stop the war in Algeria and cast adrift a million French settlers, the reactions were fierce. An attempted military coup in April 1961 led to the hurried detonation of a nuclear device in the Sahara and several close-to-successful assassination attempts on de Gaulle.¹⁰ It took two world wars for Germany to end its imperial ambitions. The largely peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in 1990–91 was an outlier – and Putin appears to be trying to correct what he sees as a historical mistake in pursuing an imperial course. He looks more like the stubborn Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, who extended Portugal’s resistance to decolonisation into the 1970s, than de Gaulle.

A war of empire, the Russia–Ukraine conflict is also a colonial war in which the Ukrainians are effectively freedom fighters. Neo-imperial Russia is behaving exactly as a brazen colonial power should be expected to act on the historical evidence – committing war crimes, killing civilians, employing rape as a weapon of war, deporting children, imposing Russian history and language on occupied populations, and politically subjugating them.

The war is one of distinctly twentieth-century vintage in terms of the critical role that ideology plays and the strategic salience of nuclear weapons. To a large extent, these factors cut in opposite directions. Ideology makes compromise inherently more difficult while nuclear danger compels even the most reckless leader to soberly contemplate the consequences of his decisions. US decision-making, in particular, combines the defence and

sometimes adamant promotion of democracy and a liberal rules-based international order with the post-Second World War strategy of nuclear-buttressed alliances and superpower primacy. This combination can lead to potentially dangerous outcomes. In March 2022, for example, US President Joe Biden signalled that the US would not transfer offensive weapon systems considered escalatory to Ukraine while saying of Putin ‘for God’s sake, this man cannot remain in power’.¹¹ A month later, the US changed tack, releasing previously withheld artillery and armour while staying mum about regime change.

Russia’s own ideology is a brew of neo-imperialism, religious nationalism and the rejection of democracy and individual free will that includes disavowals of satanism and LGBTQ rights, as well as wholesale antagonism against the collective West. In September 2022, Putin’s remarks about Hiroshima and Nagasaki took on a particularly ominous tone. ‘The United States’, he said, ‘is the only country in the world that has twice used nuclear weapons, destroying the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and setting a precedent.’¹²

Russian options

Russia failed to achieve its stated purpose of taking political control of Ukraine. A four-day *coup de main* has morphed into a protracted major war. Moscow’s forces have suffered the indignities of one of the most incompetent campaigns in modern military history, redolent of Benito Mussolini’s calamitous attack on Greece in 1940. At the strategic level, Putin’s aggression turned what the Kremlin disparagingly called the ‘collective West’ into exactly that: a group of close to 50 countries – most of which are democracies – more united in purpose than they had been since the fall of the Soviet Union. Some 1,340 additional kilometres of NATO territory now border Russia. From a Western perspective, Moscow ought to be thinking hard about bringing its war to an end.

Seen from Moscow, matters are not so simple. Firstly, the war at its current level is sustainable. Russia, a country of some 140 million inhabitants, has committed proportionately fewer troops in Ukraine than France did in its wars of empire in Indochina and Algeria, or than Portugal did in

attempting to retain its African colonies. Oil and gas revenues have taken a hit but remain sufficient to buoy the economy in general and the military-industrial complex in particular.¹³ Russia's imports of critical technologies are certainly hampered, and the West's policies do blunt Russia's ability to inflict greater harm against Ukraine. But it is worth noting that despite years of sanctions, Iran has managed to build up its force-projection capabilities.

On the ground, at the time of writing, Russia had occupied one-sixth of Ukraine's territory and was in a position to threaten Ukraine's access to the Black Sea. According to leaked documents, US intelligence officials have harboured doubts about whether the Ukrainian counter-offensive could change this picture.¹⁴ This may reinforce Russia's perception that time is on its side. Russia has not encountered major difficulties in mobilising 350,000 additional personnel to offset its initial personnel losses. Although the jury is still out on a new wave of call-ups in spring 2023, it does not appear to have provoked massive departures of military-age individuals like those witnessed in 2022, when some 900,000 people left the country.

Politically, Russia also has reasons to continue military operations. There is a serious possibility that the US electoral campaign in 2024 will sharpen domestic American opposition to sustaining current levels of material and financial support to Ukraine. It is also possible, though not probable, that Donald Trump or a Republican figure of similarly insular strategic sensibilities and autocratic sympathies could become president, in which case US military support for Ukraine would almost certainly diminish.

Of course, these societal, military and political factors can be turned on their heads: why wouldn't Russia seek to open discussions while the going is reasonably good, possibly with the cover of Chinese mediation? The practical answer is that, for the Kremlin, territorial gains, political control of Ukraine and the absence of Western defence guarantees for Ukraine constitute a single indivisible package, the components of which Putin has no urgent motivation to trade off against each other barring unpredictable domestic developments in Russia. A successful Ukrainian counter-offensive that moves the military situation back towards the status quo ante of 24 February 2022 could, however, induce the Kremlin to change its approach.

Ukrainian options

Compared with Russia's, Ukraine's range of options is narrower. From day one, short of giving in immediately to the conquerors, its only viable strategic course was a war of national survival, as a sovereign state, a distinct polity and a free nation. This continues to be the case. Ukraine's stated war aims are consistent with a war of national liberation and defence: territorial integrity, political sovereignty and guaranteed defence. To these it has added post-war objectives that include punishment of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and reparations for rebuilding the country.

These immediate and post-war goals are also those of the collective West. Only eight countries, none in the West, have recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 or of four other Ukrainian regions in September 2022.¹⁵ There is no prospect that the West will recognise *de jure* the annexation of Crimea, Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk or Zaporizhia as part of Russia. Within the West, however, disagreement may arise on the means, pace or conditions of the restoration of full territorial integrity. Ukraine might take grave note that despite the West's refusal to recognise the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states in 1940, their populations remained under Soviet rule for the next 50 years. There is additional, and potentially dangerous, ambiguity about Western security guarantees for Ukraine, notably on the issue of NATO membership.¹⁶ The internal status of Crimea and the Donbas could also be a sticking point.

At present, Ukraine's priority can only be the unyielding prosecution of the war that Russia has imposed on it. That said, its leadership has had and continues to have the wisdom of crafting frameworks for possible discussions and of encouraging foreign attempts at actual or prospective mediation, notably Turkiye's in the opening weeks of the war and, more recently, China's and the Vatican's. Other things being equal, it is unlikely that such efforts will bear fruit given the disincentives for Russia to enter into good-faith negotiations. But the Ukrainian counter-offensive, whether a failure or a success, will ensure that things will not remain equal. An aborted or frustrated Ukrainian attempt to recover a swathe of occupied territory will likely reinforce Russia's refusal to engage in meaningful discussions and weaken Western support for Ukraine, especially during the

American electoral campaign. In this context, it is worth remembering that only once Kyiv repelled Russia's attempts to seize it did the West decide to provide Ukraine with offensive weapons.¹⁷ And it was only after Ukraine's forces had recovered the areas around Kharkiv and liberated Kherson that Western deliveries of kit were seriously ramped up. If there is no quick end to the war, a long slog will bedevil the region while the West's unity is strained and its support downgraded as millions of additional Ukrainian civilians seek refuge abroad.

A successful Ukrainian counter-offensive, liberating all or part of the annexed regions, would open new opportunities, while also bringing new complexities. In political terms, a return to the military situation before 24 February 2022 would meet a condition set by Ukraine for opening substantive talks.¹⁸ While it is difficult to imagine Ukraine's purely military reconquest of Crimea, its retaking of territory lost since early 2022 would complicate Russia's logistical situation in Crimea, since its territorial link with the Russian-occupied Donbas would have been cut, and the Kerch bridge, the Perekop Isthmus and Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol would be more vulnerable. The post-2014 status quo with respect to Crimea could cease to be sustainable. Russian talk and Western anxieties about nuclear 'red lines' would again arise.

This scenario may emerge sooner rather than later, and with high levels of emotion given the inspirational effect that victory would have on Ukraine, the conflicting sense of triumph and fear of escalation that would arise in the West, and the alarm that the prospect of losing Crimea would produce in Russia. Before these factors materialise, it is worthwhile to ponder follow-on decisions now and build on some lessons from the Cold War that might be bundled as the 'Adenauer option'.

Adenauer's journey

The Berlin blockade of 1948–49 was the first direct confrontation between the Soviet Union and the principal Western powers of the Cold War. The Soviet armed forces cut off all road, rail and water links between West Berlin and the American, British and French occupation zones in the western part of Germany. Western occupation forces in Berlin could only be resupplied

by air. The ostensible cause of this forceful act was the introduction of currency reform in the Western-occupied areas including West Berlin, whereby the useless Nazi-era all-German Reichsmark was replaced by the newly minted West-only Deutschmark. If successful, as it quickly was, the monetary transformation would cement the economic and social divide between a turbocharged capitalist West Germany and a stagnating socialist East Germany. Failed reform could have blocked the momentum towards the political unification of the Western occupation zones.

The Soviets, who hadn't used direct force to seal off West Berlin, correctly assumed that the West would be self-deterred from using main force to reopen the ground links to the city and expected the livelihoods of 2m West Berliners to become completely dependent on Soviet goodwill alone. As it happened, the West unexpectedly and effectively mounted an unprecedented airlift. Since it was executed without a shot being fired in anger, the responsibility for, and fear of, escalation to the level of lethal force switched sides, now falling to the Soviets. It turned out the Soviet Union was not ready to risk a Third World War by interdicting the airlift, although it did test Western resolve by harassing Western transport aircraft. Within a year, West Germany had emerged as a constitutional democracy – the Federal Republic of Germany – and a market economy.

This Western success created the basic conditions for what became the Cold War status quo in Europe for the following four decades. However, it still left open two key issues: Germany's territorial integrity and the nature of the West's defence guarantees for the Federal Republic of Germany. These issues are no less at play in the case of Ukraine.

Although Germany had been divided into two separate republics in 1949, its political unity continued to be their common stated objective. West German constitutional law (*Grundgesetz*) was crafted to be provisional, East Germany's first constitution to be compatible with it. Initially, state flags were identical and Olympic teams were shared. The four occupying powers also embraced adherence to the principle of German unity even though the Allied Control Council ceased meeting from March 1948 onwards. While the degree to which Soviet support for a united, neutral Germany in the early 1950s was instrumental rather than operational remains an unsettled

question among historians, the fact is that Josef Stalin put forward detailed reunification proposals, as did Lavrentiy Beria, his heir presumptive, in the months following Stalin's death in March 1953.¹⁹

German reunification on terms acceptable to the Soviet Union – in particular, that of neutrality – would have precluded Germany from joining NATO, as it had so precluded Austria when it recovered its sovereignty in exchange for constitutionally neutral status in 1955. Given Germany's size, history and location, such a trade-off would have had considerably greater geostrategic consequences than it did in the case of Austria. Accordingly, West Germany's partners deemed it unacceptable. After Beria was executed in December 1953, the Soviet Union ceased to actively promote German unity.

At the time, NATO had no military plans to defend West Germany east of the Rhine for want of sufficient combat formations.²⁰ Two World Wars were there to remind all and sundry that there wasn't a huge distance between the Rhine and the continent's western coast. Consequently, NATO relied heavily on the early use of a limited US nuclear arsenal of under 300 weapons, none of whose components were based in Europe before 1954.²¹ NATO needed defensive depth, and only German rearmament would provide the allies with the personnel necessary to mount a forward and active defence, which a neutral Germany would have precluded. The logical dispensation that emerged for the West, including the Federal Republic of Germany, was to kick reunification into the long grass, to be undertaken later with West Germany as a full Article 5 ally. Consensus didn't come easily. In August 1954, France rejected the European Defence Community, planned in the May 1952 Paris Treaty, which was supposed to merge the 43 planned divisions of its six signatories, including West Germany, into multinational units at battalion level to reassure European populations that German rearmament would not resurrect the Wehrmacht. This European army was earmarked for assignment to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe. The UK also refused to endorse the European Defence Community, deeming it too supranational, and didn't commit to the permanent stationing of the British Army on the Rhine. Within a year, however, these obstacles were lifted: West Germany had joined NATO outright by May 1955 and the British Army

was required to remain in Germany under the Modified Brussels Treaty.²² No German General Staff of Prussian provenance was reconstituted, with NATO's Allied Forces Central Europe in Brunssum serving the corresponding operational function, initially under a French commander.

As a precondition, in October 1954 at the London Conference – which brought together the existing members of the Western European Union (the Benelux countries, France and the United Kingdom), Canada, Italy, West Germany and the United States – the Bonn government undertook ‘never to have recourse to force to achieve the reunification of Germany’ while Britain, France and the US – the still-occupying powers – declared that ‘in the event of any such action’ they would ‘consider the offending Government as having forfeited its rights to any guarantee and any military assistance provided for in the North Atlantic Treaty’. In effect, Article 5 would not apply in such a case. At the same time, the three occupying powers declared in the same document that ‘the achievement through peaceful means of a fully free and unified Germany remains a fundamental goal’.²³ Reunification was put to the side as an operational prospect but not forgotten.

*German
reunification was
put to the side*

None of this would have happened had West Germany – and Konrad Adenauer, its long-serving first chancellor – not agreed to difficult terms. It wasn't easy to convince the electorate that reunification would be dropped *sine die* as a practical matter, that 17m Germans would be left to the mercies of a communist regime, and that barely ten years after the Second World War German boys would be drafted into an army designed to fight a high-intensity war fought primarily on German territory with nuclear as well as conventional weapons. Persuading the German population of the wisdom of this course and winning the next federal election in 1957 with 270 seats in the Bundestag required statesmanship of the highest order.²⁴ To have achieved that victory under the slogan ‘*Keine Experimente*’ – ‘no experiments’ – when he was taking the West German state into the roiling waters of superpower confrontation was a stroke of electoral genius.

At the time, the Soviet Union complained loudly. It put together its own multinational military organisation in May 1955, with communist

Poland serving as host to the Warsaw Pact with eight founding members.²⁵ Nevertheless, diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and West Germany were established in September 1955 on the occasion of Adenauer's visit to Moscow, when he secured the release of some 10,000 remaining German prisoners of war.

Adenauer redux

There are obvious differences between Adenauer's journey and any likely outcome of Russia's attempt to conquer Ukraine. Unlike post-Second World War Germany, Ukraine isn't the perpetrator of a major war; Russia is. Accordingly, Ukraine's full and unfettered sovereignty cannot be an issue in future discussions, though like other European countries it may elect to extend minority rights beyond multilateral norms. In addition, there's a war going on in Ukraine, whereas post-war Germany and Europe merely lived under the threat of one. Ukraine relinquished its nuclear weapons in the mid-1990s; Russia did not. This asymmetry reinforces the salience of Ukraine's future defence guarantees.

Yet similarities, actual and potential, are also there. Two occupy pride of place.

Firstly, a large swathe of Ukraine lives and dies under Russian occupation. Even if that share were reduced to Crimea, the issue would remain pivotal. Crimea is about the size of Belgium, and, since the eighteenth century, its population has suffered successive waves of ethnic cleansing, notably at the expense of the Tatars. Its location is eminently strategic. During the last 250 years, Europe's powers, as well as the Ottomans, have fought for its control at one time or another. Reunification is a cherished and justified Ukrainian goal. Conversely, not only Putin but much of the Russian population supported the conquest of Crimea: '*Krymnash!*' (Crimea is ours!) is a domestically powerful slogan, like the '*Heim ins Reich!*' of the Third Reich or the '*Algérie française!*' of late-imperial France. While the Soviet Union did abandon East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, doing so required a radical change of political course in Russia itself.

The military liberation of Crimea is not a straightforward enterprise, given the balance of forces between Ukraine and Russia, as well as the

historical record of actual or attempted conquests of Crimea over the centuries.²⁶ More Western military support than is on offer today would be necessary to embark on such an operation. Even though some analysts – myself included – consider that the West has been too prone to engage in self-deterrence during the war and believe it could have liberated its stockpiles earlier and further to positive effect, it would be unwise to expect the West to furnish Ukraine with a higher level of aid than it did when Ukraine’s very existence was at stake in 2022 and 2023.

Secondly, as with Adenauer’s Germany, the defence regime of Ukraine is in suspense. When Kyiv reached agreement with the official nuclear powers to banish nuclear warheads and delivery systems from its territory, security assurances were provided. The Budapest Memorandum of December 1994 signed by Ukraine and the three depository powers of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) reaffirmed the territorial integrity of Ukraine as an independent state – including, naturally, Crimea, the Donbas and other areas that Russia has since occupied. The unilateral statements of China and France, the two other recognised nuclear powers, did so as well. These assurances counted for nought when Russia undertook to annex Crimea in 2014, and they remain empty.

The Western allies recognise the need to extend robust and credible defence assurances to Ukraine. But there is as yet no common position on their specific form, which would lie between an unequivocal commitment to open full NATO membership to Ukraine and ad hoc measures that would serve as the functional equivalent of NATO’s Article 5. A 20 April 2023 statement in Kyiv by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg that Ukraine’s ‘rightful place’ is in the Alliance suggested membership, but without a road map, a timetable or an explicit endorsement by the North Atlantic Council.²⁷ Other plans, including the permanent deployment of a blue-helmet type of force have also been unofficially broached.²⁸ A working group co-chaired by former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Andriy Yermak, head of the Ukrainian president’s office, has discussed an alternative defence regime.²⁹

There have also been suggestions in the US that an ‘Israeli model’ could be applied, whereby arms and military technology would be transferred on

a multi-year basis to Ukraine, without an explicit Article 5 commitment.³⁰ This notion skates over the fact that Israel's security is underpinned by an unstated but very real nuclear arsenal.

It is unlikely that anything less than a cast-iron mechanism in the form of NATO membership and its Article 5 would be politically acceptable to Ukraine or strategically prudent for Ukraine's Western partners. History suggests that such a provision would increase crisis stability: neither the Soviet Union nor Russia has ever tested the robustness of Article 5 in practice. In its absence, a less firm regime would merely dare the key players to put it to the test – Russia most acutely but also possibly Ukraine, which might want to determine whether the guarantees were real. Henry Kissinger rightly assesses that Ukraine's membership in NATO would be 'a means of restraining it, as well as protecting it'.³¹

Returning to the Adenauer analogy, the terms of a negotiated trade-off could be as follows: as Bonn did in 1954 when it renounced forcible reunification, Ukraine would forswear the use of force to recover Crimea, while being fast-tracked into NATO, as West Germany was in 1955. Unless NATO sought, inadvisably, to go directly to war with Russia, this could not happen while the conflict raged but would be part of a post-war dispensation. Russia would remain the de facto occupying power in Crimea and tolerate Ukrainian membership in NATO as it did with West Germany's in 1955 and then a reunited Germany's in 1990, possibly with the kinds of 'no nukes' clauses contained in the 'Two Plus Four' Treaty concluded between the four victors in the Second World War and the two then-existing German states.³²

* * *

Getting to that point turns on the fulfilment of several conditions. Firstly, as stated earlier, the military status quo needs to shift meaningfully in Ukraine's favour. As of mid-June 2023, Ukraine's position was not strong enough to box Russia into a post-Berlin-blockade posture. At that moment early in the Cold War, the Soviet Union, buffeted by the death of Stalin and Beria's removal, was compelled to give preference to holding on to its gains (East Germany then being the analogue to Crimea today) rather than risking

them in an uncertain quest to gain German neutrality and block NATO enlargement. In the current war, a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive could create the conditions for an 'Adenauer option'. Absent Ukrainian battlefield success, however, Russia has little reason to accept a trade-off.

Secondly, deft and judicious statesmanship is required, especially on the part of Ukraine and Germany. Putin is clearly no post-imperial de Gaulle or Mikhail Gorbachev, but Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy could well prove to be a latter-day Adenauer. If he doesn't, a satisfactory diplomatic outcome is unlikely. Germany, for its part, needs to make clear that it will support extending to Ukraine the same sort of trade-off as the one it promoted and benefitted from in 1955. Thus far, it has not done so, having entertained arguments about the impossibility of a country with contested borders and territory to enter NATO. It is grating to hear this line of argument given the conditions of West Germany's own accession to NATO and in light of the Rome Treaties of 1957, which established what has become the European Union.³³ West Germany itself also had unresolved border issues: it wasn't until after Germany's reunification that it unequivocally renounced the territories lying east of the Oder–Neisse line adopted at the Potsdam Conference as Germany's eastern limit by the leaders of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States. What applied to the German goose when it joined NATO surely ought to apply to the Ukrainian gander. In the same way that the goal of peaceful German reunification remained ready to be fulfilled, the rightful status of Crimea as part of Ukraine must continue to be affirmed. As a matter of post-war European precedent, however, Ukraine's accession to NATO could certainly proceed before the Crimea issue is settled.

Thirdly, the collective West needs to maintain vigorous support for Ukraine's military effort. This is more likely in the context of a successful counter-offensive.

An Adenauer option would not be an ideal solution. East Germany was locked behind the Iron Curtain and from 1961 until 1989 by the 155 km-long 'wall of shame' surrounding West Berlin.³⁴ Its population had to wait almost 30 years to enjoy the fundamental human and political rights of its Western compatriots. Although we cannot know with absolute certainty

whether there were better alternatives available in the early 1950s – say, of the Austrian variety – the arguments in favour of that counterfactual are far from compelling. And we do know what did happen: the Cold War in Europe remained cold, Germany was reunited peacefully and consensually, and the Soviet empire collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions, giving captive nations the opportunity to cast off their shackles.

Notes

- 1 See Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). Highly asymmetric wars involving non-state actors, such as the one in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, are distinct from the more traditional wars contemplated here.
- 2 See Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Conflict-related Civilian Casualties in Ukraine', United Nations, 27 January 2022, https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf. Some 220 Russian soldiers may have been killed during the first year alone. Oleg Boldyrev, 'Nemtsov Report Exposes Russia's Human Cost in Ukraine', BBC News, 12 May 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32703353>.
- 3 See Alistair Coleman, 'Ukraine Crisis: Russian News Agency Deletes Victory Editorial', BBC News, 28 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60562240>.
- 4 This is an unofficial estimate; the Soviet government's figure was 14,453.
- 5 'Ukraine's GDP Fell 29.1% in 2022 During Russia's Invasion', Reuters, 13 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-gdp-fell-291-2022-during-russias-invasion-2023-04-13/>.
- 6 See William Alberque, 'Russia's New Draft Treaties: Like 2009, but Worse', IISS, 25 January 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/01/russias-new-draft-treaties-like-2009-but-worse>.
- 7 See Mats Bergquist et al., 'The Effects of Finland's Possible NATO Membership: An Assessment', Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 29 April 2016, https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/the_effects_of_finlands_possible_nato_membership/c206b3c2-aaaa-5809-c545-7aa67c9bcb2a?t=1525861455616.
- 8 Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', President of Russia, 12 July 2021, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/misc/66182>.
- 9 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
- 10 On the 'Gerboise verte' nuclear explosion, see Jean Guisnel and Bruno Tertrais, *Le Président et la Bombe* (Paris:

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 - 17 See, for example, Karen DeYoung and Annabelle Timsit, "'Putin Never Imagined'" Global Rally of Ukraine Support, Defense Secretary Says', *Washington Post*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/26/austin-putin-ukraine-support-military-russia/>.
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